

# Don't Forget Your Lessons Learned!

## A Review of 16 Years Worth of Notes

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I originally came up with the idea for this article while sitting in a bookstore drinking coffee. Perhaps it was the caffeine affecting my senses, but a book on management written by the first winner of *The Apprentice* caught my attention that day. After I stopped laughing, I figured if a guy can write about his management techniques and prowess after spending two months winning a television contest with The Donald, I should be able to jot down some ideas I've learned after being in the Air Force for more than 16 years. Looking back on my lessons learned, many are common-sense practices, but it's easy to lose track of the simple things when you become engrossed in day-to-day program activities.

In addition to spending time at the neighborhood bookstore, I was also busy packing up my office for relocation to another facility. I have natural engineering packrat tendencies, but even I was amazed at the stuff I had saved and the amount of notes I had taken in the past year. Connecting the dots between filing and hanging out at the bookstore, it dawned on me that as acquisition professionals, we sometimes forget that our own experiences can help form a good lessons-learned notebook or management book to help guide us in future endeavors. While the number of self-help books at the local bookstore is impressive, perhaps the best learning examples are what we can document ourselves. Looking back on my experiences, I have been able to identify nine key lessons learned.

### **1. Incorporate and use effective communication skills.**

Although it is perceived in today's high-tech environment that disseminating information quickly and accurately is easy, I have found that it takes a lot of upfront effort and discipline. First, it is important to communicate progress, issues, and achievements to management and leadership. One technique that has greatly helped me with this is submitting summary status reports, on a regular basis, that highlight progress and issues. This serves two purposes. First, it provides a program status and notes any possible issues to leadership, and second, it allows a person to develop critical thinking and assessment skills. It is always easy just to report information (throw information over



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the fence), but it's a different process to analyze data, understand the impacts, and be able to provide recommendations as needed.

## **2. Understand the big picture.**

One of my personal weaknesses is a desire to jump into a problem as soon as possible. However, it is worth the upfront investment in time to understand and appreciate the overall strategy. As a first step, one should understand the mission, vision, organizational construct, and general budget of the customer. From this, the customer's priorities and primary objectives can be discerned. A better picture emerges of how the specific acquisition program falls into the overarching mission, and in turn, this provides insight into how the program contributes to the agency's goals. Regarding the big picture, it is important to understand those issues that concern senior leadership. Knowing the program's critical path and how resources are allocated can give you important insight into how management thinks, behaves, and operates. Additionally, having a firm grasp of the master plan and of what is important to management can help guide what is included in status reports.

## **3. Know and understand the program's master schedule, acquisition strategy, and program risks.**

Developing this insight helps project managers build credibility among their counterparts and also helps them to focus on what they need to be focused on. Adopting an approach in which you seek to understand the schedule, cost, and technical performance effects on the program's critical path will make you a much more effective project

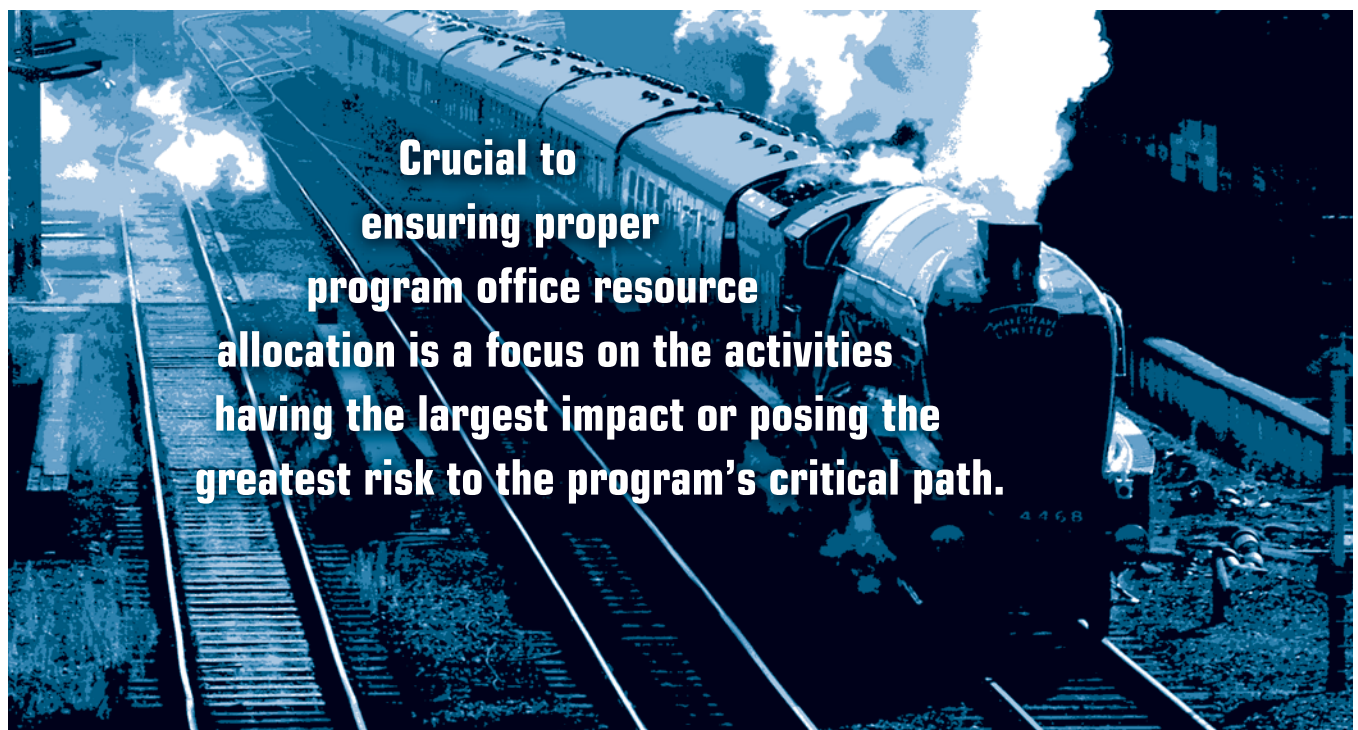
officer or program manager. In any acquisition program, there will always be a myriad of issues and associated resolution activities. Crucial to ensuring proper program office resource allocation is a focus on the activities having the largest impact or posing the greatest risk to the program's critical path.

## **4. Adopt a standardized, systematic approach for understanding, troubleshooting, and resolving issues.**

The first step is to understand the issue. In dealing with hardware testing issues, this might include a thorough investigation of the testing configuration and all known facts. The second step is to appoint experts to troubleshoot the issue, with an emphasis on root cause analysis. Once the issue is understood and has been studied and researched in detail, the best path forward can then be formulated. Finally, the path forward should be implemented with follow-up activities to ensure that the defined resolution steps are being taken and the issues are being resolved as planned. Following this systematic approach will make it easier to report progress to management on resolving the issue.

## **5. Give appropriate focus and concentration to the review process.**

From my experience in the Air Force, this fact has been continually reinforced. First, for major reviews, it is paramount to develop agreed-upon event entrance and exit criteria upfront and early with the prime contractor. It is often assumed that the mere fact of hosting and/or conducting a design review means that the review was successfully closed. But it should always be acknowledged





that the review itself is an outbrief of a program's status at a particular point in time. For example, leading up to the overall system review are subsystem design audits, analyses reviews, and document completion, which are folded into the system review. Accordingly, the contractor is ready to host an event when entrance criteria have been developed and are satisfied prior to the review. The readiness of having a review can be assessed prior to the review (approximately a week or two out) by conducting a "go/no-go" meeting. Typically, this is a vital decision gate that evaluates if the entrance criteria have been satisfied going into an important program milestone.

## **6. Plan and conduct quality/successful events.**

I have seen several examples of a key review or briefing being driven primarily by a date, which has resulted in a rush to conduct the review or briefing. Of course when this happens, it leads to incomplete events, which ultimately means a delta (or follow-up) review must be conducted at a later date. Preparing for delta reviews drives additional effort, which impacts both cost and schedule and subsequently puts added pressure on both the contractor and government team to effectively close out the event. This affects the ability to plan, implement, and execute the next phase of the program.

## **7. Expect the unexpected.**

This is especially true when dealing with the acquisition of hardware and software. For instance, in assembly, integration, and testing, problems will occur that will challenge the program office and the contractor team. The key is having the right people and the right processes in place. These two elements will normally make the difference in solving the issue appropriately.

## **8. Take care of the people doing the heavy lifting.**

As a deputy program manager, I made it a priority to submit personnel in our division for quarterly awards (both individual and team). This really helped me to understand and appreciate their contributions to the program. When drafting award write-ups and performance appraisals, it is important to focus on clarity, attention to detail, and crisp writing in capturing the appropriate accomplishments. As a leader and manager, I owed it to my people to put this philosophy into action. As an acquisition manager, it is important to keep up-to-date on your personnel's training needs, including making sure personnel are keeping up with their acquisition professional development program courses and are certified appropriately.

## **9. Don't overlook your own professional development.**

As acquisition professionals, we need to keep current with our Defense Acquisition University courses and to make sure we are Defense Acquisition Workforce Improvement



Act-certified in the appropriate acquisition career fields. From my experience, it is vital to work closely with your training point of contact to ensure you get the proper training to help do your job. In addition, people who have a wealth of experience and success in working on major acquisition programs may surround you in your program office. Learn from these experts, as they are battle-tested.

In summary, I hope this article has focused on the importance of learning from your own experiences. It's amazing how going back and reflecting on your personal experiences, notes, and reports can help lead to additional insight into current problems and issues. Doing this periodically can provide invaluable insight into how successful (or not) a particular course of action was in alleviating an issue. You may also be surprised at the wealth of practical experience and knowledge that you have gained in working as an acquisition professional. Who knows, perhaps one day you will use your own lessons learned to make your program successful or to be a future winner of *The Apprentice*.

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